

## **Candidate Divergence and Campaign Contributions**

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### **Abstract**

Many game-theoretical models in political science have suggested that campaign contributions are responsible for the failure of candidates to converge, but there have been few empirical tests of this hypothesis. In this paper I test the theory at the individual level using survey data of individual campaign contributors and at the aggregate level using candidate campaign finance data for Congressional candidates. I find that while there is some evidence that individuals take candidate positions into account when making campaign contributions, these contributions are not the source of candidate divergence. I conclude with some alternative explanations for divergence.

Nearly a half century after Downs (1957) analyzed candidate competition and three quarters of a century after Hotelling (1929) developed the economic theory that influenced Downs' work, political scientists have yet to offer a compelling explanation why the central prediction of the model is wrong. The model is intuitive: if two vote-maximizing candidates are campaigning on a one-dimensional space in an election, and voters vote for the candidate closer to them ideologically, both candidates will campaign at the point that maximizes the utility of the median voter. This is because any deviation from this strategy by a candidate can be exploited by the other candidate: if one candidate campaigns anywhere other than the median voter's ideal point, the other candidate can win the election by campaigning closer to the ideal point of the median voter, winning more than half of the votes in the election.

The empirical hypotheses of this parsimonious and intuitive model are contradicted by the results of many empirical studies; candidates campaigning for various offices in the United States tend to adopt divergent ideological platforms while campaigning for office. Page (1978) finds divergence at the presidential level. Poole and Rosenthal (1984, 1997) demonstrate that Congressional members from the two parties are ideologically polarized. Ansolobehere, Snyder and Stewart (2001) show that in recent Congressional campaigns, candidates running in the same district tend to diverge in position-taking.

There have been many theoretical attempts to explain the divergence in candidate's platforms; primary elections (Wright 1978, Aranson and Ordeshook 1972), candidate concern for policy as well as reelection and uncertainty about the median voter's ideal point (Calvert 1985) and under some conditions, a valence advantage of one of the candidates (Grosseclose 2001) may be responsible for candidate divergence.

Many political scientists have suggested a link between resources and candidate polarization. Poole and Rosenthal (1984) argue that "While some competitive pressures may push candidates toward the center, the need for resources retains them at the extremes" (1075). Aldrich (1995) argues that activists, including campaign contributors, "shape and constrain the behavior of office seekers...." (21). Ferguson (1995) offers a critique of Downs' argument, claiming that the omission of campaign funds from the theory undermines the theory's predictions.

While the above studies suggest that candidates diverge due to campaign funds, none of them specify an explicit model of campaign funds<sup>1</sup>; this makes them difficult to test empirically. There are many game theoretical studies that predict that candidates of the two major parties should diverge due to campaign resources. Aldrich (1983) predicts candidate divergence under a number of assumptions about contributor behavior (see also Aldrich and McGinnis 1989). Baron (1994) and Grossman and Helpmann (2001) predict that candidates will diverge while seeking resources from interest groups (see also Baron 1989). Moon (2004) develops a model that predicts that candidates diverge due to resources. Only the last of these papers involves an empirical test that confirms the theory. The empirical analysis below will use the predictions from the above game theoretical models to determine if candidate divergence is due to campaign contributions.

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section will explain the data used for the study. The following section will present an analysis of individual contributor motivations; I find modest support for some of Aldrich's (1983) hypotheses about

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the Appendix of Ferguson (1995).

individual campaign contributions. The following section explores candidate divergence among House candidates in 1996; from the analysis I conclude that, contrary to Moon's (2004) empirical analysis and the theoretical work presented above, campaign contributions are not the reason for candidate divergence.

## Data

Previous studies of Congressional candidate divergence have used vote-based scores to measure candidate positioning (e.g. Wright 1994 and Moon 2004). This limits analyses to members of Congress but prevents analyzing the candidate positions of challengers. In addition, for the purpose of testing candidate position-taking in elections, vote-based data may not be appropriate. The aggregate study below uses National Political Awareness test scores from a survey of congressional candidates run by Project Vote Smart (<http://www.vote-smart.org/>). The data were obtained from Charles Stewart III's web page ([http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data\\_page.html](http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data_page.html)); see Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001). The authors use factor analysis to create ideological codes of candidates based on candidate responses to the Project Vote Smart survey. Candidate status and party were obtained from this dataset as well. Campaign funding data was obtained from the Federal Election Commission website ([www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)). The individual analyses were conducted using 2000 National Election Studies (NES) data (Burns et. al., 2002).

## Individual Analysis: Ideological Motivations for Contributing to Candidates

Aldrich (1983) and Aldrich and McGinnis (1989) develop a model of individual contributions to candidates in a two party race and finds that if candidates seek funds from activists, then the parties will diverge. There are three theories of individual behavior, derived from the literature on participation (Davis, Hinich and Ordeshook 1970, Downs 1957) that predict different magnitudes of divergence for the two candidates: the alienation hypothesis, the indifference hypothesis, and a combined theory.

The *indifference hypothesis* states that as the parties<sup>2</sup> converge to one another, potential contributors are less likely to contribute to their preferred party. This is because the relative benefit of supporting one party over another decreases as the parties converge. This hypothesis is based on the *relative* policy benefits that one party provides over another.

The *alienation hypothesis* states that individuals are more likely to abstain from costly campaign activity, such as contributing to or voting for their preferred candidate, the farther away the *closer* party is from them. This is because the motivation to contribute to a candidate is weaker when an individual is not closely aligned with a particular party<sup>3</sup>. Finally, a third theory holds that both alienation and indifference factor into an individual's contributing behavior.

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<sup>2</sup> In this section, the terms "party" and "candidate" are used interchangeably; this is because the survey data only asks about ideological proximity to parties and not candidates.

<sup>3</sup> Previous formal work on individual electoral behavior (Davis, Hinich and Ordeshook 1970, Downs 1957) mentions the alienation and indifference hypotheses in other contexts.

I will evaluate each of these theories of individual contributing behavior using NES data from the 2000 election. The dependent variable is a dummy variable that equals one if individuals reported contributed money to a candidate, to one of the parties, or both, and 0 otherwise. Individuals are not the only source of candidate funds; it may be the case that it is PAC money that produces divergence among candidates. However, individuals provide the majority of candidate funds; in the 2001-2 election cycle, individuals produced 55 percent of all candidate funds including candidate self-financing, loans, money earned in interest, party coordinated spending and party contributions; PACs provided only 28 percent of these funds (see Hershey 2005, 221).

The NES survey asks respondents to rate the parties on a 7-point liberal-conservative scale and to rate themselves on the same scale. There is no question asking individuals to rate the ideological positions of the candidates running for office; the implicit model I am testing, then, assumes that when making a contribution, individuals are concerned about the policy goals of the party as a whole. For this reason, the dependent variable includes contributions to the parties in addition to candidates.

The distance from the closer party is measured using the absolute difference between the ideologically closer party and the respondent's rating of himself. (That is, an individual who rates himself as a 3, Democrats as a 2 and Republicans as a 5 would have a closeness score of 1); the alienation hypothesis posits that there should be a negative relationship between this score and the probability of a contribution to one of the candidates. The distance between parties is measured simply as the absolute difference between the respondent's ratings of the two parties; the indifference hypothesis posits a positive relationship between this measure and the probability of contributing to one of the parties.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 presents results from probit regressions of contributions to candidates on ideological and other variables. The table presents results from the test of the indifference, alienation and combined hypotheses; each hypothesis is tested with control variables for family income, education, age, gender and marital status (see Verba et. al. 1995)<sup>5</sup>.

There is no support for the alienation hypotheses; the respondent's perceived distance from the closer party did not have an impact on campaign contributions. The indifference hypothesis is better supported by the data; the second indifference model (with the control variables) predicts a modest increase from .09 to .12 for a one-standard deviation increase from the mean of the perceived distance between the two major parties (that is, an increase from the mean of 2.93 to 4.45) if the control variables are set at their mean levels (or modal levels for the dummy variables). A similar change holds for the first indifference model.

While not supporting the alienation hypothesis, this section has provided some evidence for the indifference hypothesis, which predicts that individual campaign contributions result in candidate divergence (Aldrich 1983). The next section explores to what extent individual contributions result in candidate divergence in House races.

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<sup>4</sup> The squared difference was used instead of the absolute difference in alternative models of the three hypotheses in the three models below, but did not change any of the substantive results (not shown).

<sup>5</sup> Control variables for attitudes (campaign interest and knowledge) and for social capital (number of years in neighborhood and religious attendance) were added in additional models; none of the coefficients for the hypotheses listed were significant at  $\alpha=.05$  under these specifications.

**Table 1: Probit Estimates of Individual Contributions**

	<i>Alienation Hypothesis</i>	<i>Indifference Hypothesis</i>	<i>Combined</i>
<b>Ideological Variables</b>			
Distance from Closer Party	.16(.15)	.09(.04)*	.14(.14)
Distance Between Parties	-		.02(.09)
<b>Demographic Variables</b>			
Family Income	.09(.04)*	.06(.02)**	.09(.04)*
Education (Highest Grade)	.02(.05)	.07(.03)**	.02(.05)
Age (Years)	.02(.01)**	.02(.00)***	.02(.01)*
Female	-.09(.25)	.04(.11)	-.05(.26)
Married	-.04(.24)	.11(.11)	-.08(.25)
Constant	-3.2(.89)***	-3.8(.41)***	-3.1(.90)**
N	268	1200	263
Pseudo R square	.00	.10	.11

*Dependent variable equals 1 if respondent contributed to a political party, a candidate, or both, and zero otherwise. Standard errors in parentheses. All cases weighted; See Burns et. al. (2001) for details.*

*\* indicates significance at .05; \*\* indicates significance at .01; \*\*\* indicates significance at .001*

### **Aggregate Analysis: Campaign Funds and Candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives, 1996**

In the only previous statistical test of the role of campaign funds on candidate divergence, Moon (2004) tests some comparative statics from his model to determine the role of campaign resources on candidate divergence. One prediction from this model is that candidates with a funding advantage should be less likely to diverge in order to receive more funds. This raises the possibility of endogeneity bias, however, because candidates can receive more funds by diverging. Moon (2004) attempts to solve this problem with two-stage least squares regression.

There is a much simpler and more intuitive prediction made by formal theories of candidate competition. The claim common to all the formal theoretical literature is that candidates diverge to receive more campaign funds. That is, candidates lose votes directly by diverging from the other candidate, but gain votes indirectly by raising more money from party activists or extreme voters or interest groups and spending this money on the campaign. Candidates should diverge until the marginal increase in votes gained through funds raised by diverging equals the amount of votes the candidate loses because he is diverging ideologically. If these values are not equal, then the candidate can gain

more votes by campaigning either to the right or to the left, depending on which direction will increase his net total votes. For example, if the marginal amount of votes the candidate can win through funds raised by diverging ideologically is greater than the amount he is losing by diverging ideologically, then the candidate should continue to diverge because the money he raises will more than “buy back” the votes he has lost by diverging ideologically. Grossman and Helpman (2001) offer a simple version of this model, while Aldrich (1983), Aldrich and McGinnis (1989), Baron (1994) and Moon (2004) offer more complex versions.

In order to test this hypothesis, I first estimate the effect of ideological extremism on the two-party vote. Next, I estimate the effects of divergence on candidate fundraising. The marginal impact of these funds on the vote should be equal to the rate at which the candidates lose votes by diverging.

The results of the first step, the estimation of the effect of candidate extremism on the challenger vote share, are presented in Table 2<sup>6</sup>. There are two models. The first regresses logged total incumbent funds on incumbent and challenger extremism (that is, NPAT scores times 1 for Republican incumbents and -1 times NPAT scores for Democratic incumbents; NPAT scores increase for more conservative members), challenger extremism, logged campaign funds, a dummy variable for Republican incumbents, and district extremism (measured with the presidential vote times 1 for Republican incumbents and -1 for Democratic incumbents) and a dummy for marginal races. The second model adds a dummy variable for whether or not the race was competitive or not; the variable equals 1 if the challenger received greater than 45 percent of the two party vote and 0 otherwise.

The results of the table suggest that while challengers are not harmed by campaigning at an extreme ideological position, incumbents lose more than 7 percent of the vote by diverging one unit on the ideological scale. The funding variables conform to previous results estimated by OLS: challenger funding affects the challenger percentage of the vote but incumbent funding does not seem to matter (e.g. Jacobson 1990). This substantive result has long been a subject of debate in the campaign finance literature; for example, (Green and Krasno 1990) argue that incumbent spending can be as effective as challenger spending in House races. However, the discussion below will reveal that the results do not affect the incentives for incumbents.

The optimal ideological location is the point at which the marginal increase in votes gained through raising more funds equals the marginal rate at which his votes are decreasing. I have shown that as incumbents locate at more extreme positions, they tend to lose votes. The next part of the analysis will determine if candidates receive more funds because of their extreme position taking.

Table 3 suggests that they do not. The table presents results of regressions of logged incumbent funds on candidate conservatism, logged challenger funds, the Republican share of the two-party vote, and a dummy variable for whether or not the race was competitive. The parties are analyzed separately, because while the above theories claim that parties *diverge* to raise funds from party activists, some literature suggests that

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<sup>6</sup> The method is similar to Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan (2002). The difference is that the current model includes challengers and uses NPAT scores, a measure of candidate position taking (see Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart 2001) rather than roll call votes.

both parties move to a *more conservative* position in order to raise funds (Schneider 2002; see also Ferguson 1995).

The results in the table show that there is no significant impact of extremism on incumbent funds. Table 4 presents a similar analysis for challengers; challenger positioning has no impact on incumbent funds. In fact, Table 4 shows that as incumbents take more extreme positions, the *challenger* is more likely to raise more funds. This coefficient is significant at the .05 level for Republican challengers in Model 2.

If fundraising were the reason that candidates diverged in Congressional elections, it should be the case that the marginal increase in the vote from funds gained from diverging should equal the marginal magnitude of the votes lost by diverging. If, for example, the candidate was losing votes at a much faster rate by diverging than she was gaining votes from funds raised by diverging, she should move closer to the ideological center. However, the results presented here show that Congressional candidates diverge for reasons other than fundraising. To demonstrate this point, note from Model 1 that incumbents lose 7.69 percent of the two party vote (standard error = 2.59) for every ideological unit that the incumbent moves towards the ideological extreme on the NPAT scale. Note from Model 5 that incumbents gain .23 in logged funds (standard error = .34). Note finally that from Model 1, the effect of a unit increase in logged funds for the incumbent results in a decrease of .32 in the incumbent's vote. A two-tailed t-test shows that the rate at which the incumbent loses votes from diverging is significantly larger than the rate at which the incumbent "gains" votes by raising more funds from diverging. Incumbents could perform better by campaigning closer to the ideological center; campaign funds are not the source of incumbent divergence as they do not make up for incumbent votes lost by diverging.

As mentioned above, Green and Krasno (1990) dispute the OLS estimates of the effect of incumbent spending, arguing that incumbent spending can be as effective as challenger spending. In this case, however, the substantive results remain the same: for each unit that the incumbent diverges, he loses more than 7 percent of the two party vote. His gain of .23 in logged funds times about 3 (the OLS estimate of the effect of challenger spending) still yields less than 1 percent of the two-party vote-not nearly enough to make up for the 7 percent that the incumbent loses by diverging.

The results for challengers show that challengers do not seem to lose votes by diverging; nor do they gain funds from ideological extremism. This suggests that while their behavior does not clearly contradict the theory, as incumbent behavior does, it does not appear that challengers are attempting to balance the votes lost from diverging with more campaign funds as the theory suggests.

To summarize the results of the aggregate analysis, challengers neither lose votes nor gain funds from diverging ideologically. Incumbents lose votes by diverging, but at a much faster rate than they gain funds from diverging ideologically. Incumbents could gain votes by campaigning closer to the ideological center. It appears that theories of fundraising, although receiving modest support at the individual level, do not explain candidate divergence in Congressional elections.

**Table 2: Ordinary Least Squares Estimates of the Effects of Candidate Divergence on the Challenger Percentage of the Two-Party Vote**

	Model 1	Model 2
Incumbent Extremism	7.69(2.59)**	7.17(2.46)**
Challenger Extremism	.23(2.29)	.25(2.17)
Logged Challenger Funds	3.30(.23)***	2.87(.23)***
Logged Incumbent Funds	.32(.56)	.22(.53)
Republican Incumbent	39.51(3.27)***	37.68(3.12)***
Republican President Vote (Coded by Incumbent Party)	-.49(.05)***	-.46(.04)***
Marginal Race	--	5.07(.91)
Constant	-24.59(6.79)***	-18.19(6.55)**
N	282	282
R squared	.77	.79
Adj. R squared	.76	.79
Root MSE	4.77	4.53

*Standard errors in parentheses.*

*\* indicates significance at .05; \*\* indicates significance at .01; \*\*\* indicates significance at .001*

**Table 3: Logged Incumbent Funds and Ideological Extremism**

	Model 3:	Model 4:	Model 5:	Model 6:
	Democratic	Democratic	Republican	Republican
	Incumbent	Incumbent	Incumbent	Incumbent
	Funds	Funds	Funds	Funds
Incumbent Conservatism	-.27(.48)	-.27(.49)	.23(.34)	.21(.34)
Challenger Conservatism	-.61(.38)	-.61(.38)	.48(.33)	.48(.33)
Logged Challenger Funds	.16(.04)***	.16(.04)***	.21(.03)***	.20(.03)***
Marginal Race	--	.02(.20)	--	.07(.12)
Republican Two-Party				
Presidential Vote	1.47(.76)	1.46(.76)	-.66(.64)	-.58(.66)
Constant	11.42(.41)***	11.42(.43)***	11.06(.47)***	11.13(.49)***
N	121	121	161	161
R squared	.30	.51	.36	.36
Adj. R squared	.27	.50	.34	.34
Root MSE	.56	1.08	.48	.48

*Standard errors in parentheses.*

*\* indicates significance at .05; \*\* indicates significance at .01; \*\*\* indicates significance at .001*

**Table 4: Logged Challenger Funds and Ideology**

	Model 7:	Model 8:	Model 9:	Model 10:
	Democratic	Democratic	Republican	Republican
	Challenger	Challenger	Challenger	Challenger
	Funds:	Funds	Funds	Funds
Incumbent Conservatism	1.42(.82)	.88(.76)	-2.21(1.13)	-2.20(1.10)*
Challenger Conservatism	.49(.81)	.38(.74)	.75(.90)	.54(.88)
Logged Incumbent Funds	1.28(.17)***	1.02(.16)***	.90(.20)***	.84(.20)***
Marginal Race	--	1.44(.26)***	--	1.15(.45)***
Republican Two-Party	-6.54(1.50)***	-3.88(1.45)**	7.38(1.69)***	6.90(.20)***
Presidential Vote				
Constant	-3.59(2.47)	-1.32(2.30)	-3.35(2.67)	-2.42(2.64)
N	161	161	121	121
R squared	.42	.32	.40	.44
Adj. R squared	.40	.31	.38	.41
Root MSE	1.18	.52	1.33	1.30

*Standard errors in parentheses.*

*\* indicates significance at .05; \*\* indicates significance at .01; \*\*\* indicates significance at .001*

## Conclusion

The results in this paper provide support for the importance of ideology in individual campaign contributions. While the individual analyses provide no support for the alienation hypothesis, they provide support for the indifference hypothesis: individual contributors are influenced by the ideological distance between the parties. This supports some of the theories' claims about individual contributors; potential contributors are influenced by policy.

However, the aggregate analysis of campaign funds suggests that candidates do not diverge to receive more campaign funds. Contrary to the game theoretical models cited above, the evidence presented in this paper shows that incumbents appear to lose votes and do not raise funds by adopting extreme positions. In fact, there is some evidence that challengers gain more funds when an incumbent adopts an ideologically extreme position. Challengers, on the other hand, do not seem to lose votes nor gain funds by diverging. While the result for incumbents contradicts the *conclusions* of the game theoretical models, the challenger results contradict the *assumptions* of the theory.

Future studies could explore other resources in order to determine other factors that contribute to candidate divergence. Primaries (Aronson and Ordeshook 1978), valence advantages (Grosseclose 2001) and turnout (e.g. Downs 1957, Hinich and Ordeshook 1970) could play a role in candidate divergence.

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